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Part 1

Aincrad Standard Time, Year 2024, 23rd October, 9 PM.

I, the level 96 swordsman, Kirito, have proposed to the level 94 fencer, Asuna, and she has accepted.

Of course, this happened in a VRMMO known as Sword Art Online—a scene within a RPG. In the real world, Asuna and I have not even seen each other's faces, and in the first place, I'm not even at an age that can legally marry. —Asuna might be just about there in terms of that, though.

I do not know what was the game that first adopted the «Marriage System», but marriage between fellow characters has always been popular in the world of MMOs, even back since twenty years ago. Some sort of advantage is provided to «spouses» characters in most series, so there are many cases where marriage was done for that purpose alone, and of course, with there being players who marry as a part of their earnest roleplaying, it seems there were also some among those where the in-game marriage ended up being an impetus for marriage in the real world. This is merely my own assumption, but I believe that even if all of the MMO players in the entire world were to be asked the question «Do you have any experience of marrying in a game?», it's possible that more than half of them would give an affirmative reply.

However, even if it's regrettable (though I'm not quite sure if I should describe it as so), I have never ever married anyone, within all of the MMORPGs I have played thus far.

The reason is—well, it's probably due to my weak interpersonal communication skills, but alongside that, I had absolutely no idea on what to make of the concept of an «in-game marriage». If the male character, Kirito, controlled by me, Kirigaya Kazuto, were to marry a female character, Somegirl[1] (fictional), controlled by a female, or perhaps a male (this is easily possible as well) who exists somewhere in this world, is it okay for me to simply interpret it as a permanently fixed party with this Somegirl-san? Or would I have to go to the extent of roleplaying my love for that Somegirl-san? Or perhaps—I would even have to be wary of that certain living being behind Somegirl-san...?

To be honest, it's not like I had no experience of receiving the offer, "Wanna get married （〃＾▽＾〃）", from female characters who were registered as friends or guild members in the games I played before SAO. However, in every single one of those cases, I would freeze in front of the monitor while breaking out in cold sweat and end up giving a reply like "（´ノ ω；｀）".

I was too cautious, too analytical, too nervous; even I think so myself.

However, to begin with, the reason why I indulged in MMO games was because they were temporary worlds. Behind each and every character, there exist unfamiliar players with unrevealed genders and ages. As a result, it can't be helped but to wonder "Who exactly is this person?". Everyone isn't quite themselves, myself included.

Despite that, to me, the system, «Marriage», is to collide head-on into that recognition. Even if the marriage was within a game, one can't help but to be self-conscious when linked to a certain someone through a special relationship. Of that «certain person» moving the mouse and typing on the keyboard in the real world.

As such, I shirked away from becoming permanent partners with people in net games and of course, that shouldn't have changed even in this unnatural death game, Sword Art Online. No, with their avatars and actual appearances being the same, it might provide all the more reason to keep a distance from others.

However, the one who slowly dispersed, shrunk and finally erased my discomfort—or perhaps anxiety, was certainly Asuna.

In the slightly less than two years since the start of the death game, though the situation differed at times, that girl did not ever disappear from my sight. She was first a casual party member of mine, and shortly after that, a comrade within the clearing group even after she joined the guild, Knights of the Blood. There was that time we investigated the strange murder case in the area together and that other time I got her to cook an S-grade food item for me. Through those exchanges with Asuna, I realized it.

That in this world—and definitely in the real world as well, and just maybe in the non-fulldive MMO games I played before SAO as well, what determined whether the people before my eyes really are themselves, was my own self. If I were to leave those doubts and distance aside, they would become lies. If I were to put my trust into them and compromise, they would become real.

Now, right before my eyes, there is a swordswoman named Asuna.

I enjoy the time I spend with her. Asuna fighting, Asuna laughing, even Asuna getting angry, watching each and every one of those moments brings forth strong emotions in my heart. She was always within reach and it seems clear that she was interested too. When I look at Asuna now, I don't ponder upon what exactly her true self is like anymore, not even in the slightest.

Hence, I proposed to Asuna.

Honestly speaking, it's not that my various doubts are gone. I still do not have the conviction to claim that this emotion of mine that seeks for Asuna to be that so-called «love». I've always kept a distance from my family in the real world and ever since I've come to this world, I've relentlessly persisted on in my solo playing, making me wonder if I really did have the heart to love someone else.

However, I figured I might be able to find the answer to that final doubt if I'm together with Asuna.

—And, all of that was the «comprehension of marriage in SAO» I had arrived at thus far.

On another topic, as it really is marriage, even if it happened in the world of a game, there are still the customary material aspects to it. To be specific, what to do about getting a new home, so to speak.

We will naturally live together after marriage, but in that case, before even considering my refuge in the back alleys of the main city of Algade on the fiftieth floor, Asuna's mansionette in Salemburg, on the sixty-first floor was already slightly too cramped. Not to mention, putting the issue about the physical area aside, there are circumstances that forces us to be unable to live where we've resided in until now.

The sub-leader of the guild, «Knights of the Blood», Asuna the «Flash», could be said to be the player most highly idolized in Aincrad at present.

She was almost always first in the player popularity polls in the newspapers published by the information brokers, even having several fan clubs, with a major general store chain offering not a CD debut, but a RC (recording crystal) debut, though it seems that she drove them off with thrusts from her rapier.

It feels like ages since her «Little Red Riding Hood» phase at the start of the death game when she kept her hooded cape on the entire time, but anyway, if the public were to know of the marriage of an idol like that, there's no doubt it would get picked up by each and every one of the newspapers, all at once.

Her many fans will lament and moan, and energy might just be formed by that, eventually converting into a curse property attack, causing her partner in marriage, me, to suffer a drop in my real luck—

even if you were to leave that aside, being interrogated and the like is no way to spend a newlywed life, so I would like to keep as much of the truth behind the marriage under wraps as I could.

Of course, we did send messages to that girl's many friends, and my few ones, so we didn't expect it to stay a secret for long, but nevertheless, we weren't in any position to stay immersed in our honeymoon mood for too long. It has only been four days since the floor boss of the seventy-fourth floor, «The Gleameyes», has been defeated and it should take some time before the boss room on the seventy-fifth floor, the current front lines, is found, but both Asuna and I have no choice but to participate in that boss battle, even if we can desert the labyrinth tower's mapping.

As such, if we could have ten days... no, two weeks... until that happens, we would have to search for a home where we could pass our time slightly more peacefully.

If we list the items we have accumulated through our gameplay on the newspapers' classified section, converting most of those we have no pressing need for into col, we might just be able to afford a detached house in the area... or in other words, one within the city walls. However, if we were to set up a new home in a place like that, it would end up being found out by the information brokers on that very day. One that's on a cleared floor unfrequented by players, not to mention built on its edge and having a reasonable amount of space while not being eye-catching—such a house would be ideal.

Those were rather harsh conditions, but in actual fact, I have already had an inkling of a fitting unit before I proposed.

It has already been more than a year and a half since the front lines was stationed at the twenty-second floor of Aincrad. It was a low floor while being spacious, but nearly all of it was covered in deep forests, grass plains and lakes, possessing a beautiful, yet smooth topography, and furthermore, neither important quests, nor field bosses exist there. The players of the clearing group took a straight route to the labyrinth from the main town, Coral Village, scrambled up the tower with its mild degree of difficulty, defeating its boss in a number of days quite below the average back then. At the present moment, the only players who visit the twenty-second floor would probably be fishermen heading to the assorted sized lakes and woodcrafters gathering wood materials in the forests.

Hence, it would be a place I haven't visited for over a year either, but for some reason, a certain spectacular view it had was fixed in my memory.

It was on the day the twenty-second floor's boss was crushed, when I ran about alone, trying to clear as much of the quests I've left undone ever since I accepted them.

I found a narrow, small path on the bank of the clear, blue lake, one that wouldn't be noticed unless close by. It seemed unrelated to the quests, but when I tried following the path and climbed the hill, I found a deserted detached log house erected there at the end, surrounded by a thick forest of coniferous trees.

Its log walls were covered in moss here and there, while two or three saplings poked out from the roof, but it didn't give off the sense of rotting away at all. Rather, it blended in with the nature surrounding it, giving off a sense of beauty, as if it was a home owned by one of the Elven race.

I quietly opened the wooden gate (as that was possible, it couldn't have belonged to another player), checked the interior with my Search skill (as it was empty, it wasn't a NPC's home either), and after I approached the terrace at its front, I finally found it. A «FOR SALE» wooden tag that hung from the door knob.

Not having made it to even level 40, I could only point at the price listed on the wooden tag while I counted the number of digits, let out a sigh, and left the place behind while stubbornly glancing back

over and over again. Whilst holding on the dream that someday, I will get my item storage bursting with enough col to buy this house.

In actual fact, when my level was in its seventies while the fiftieth floor was conquered, there was nothing I couldn't afford if I really wanted it. But as one of the clearing group, I couldn't have a place that requires a twenty minute trip to get to the nearest teleport gate as my base of operation. In the end, I set up a refuge in the main city of the fiftieth floor, Algade, and ended up spending my sleeping time there up till several days ago.

It has actually been a year and a half since I found that house in the forest on the twenty-second floor—

I decided to propose to Asuna and when I thought about what to do about a new home, what immediately came to mind was that log house. I believed there was no better choice.

As my proposal speech, I first revealed information on the aforementioned log house, suggested to move there and finally, I said, "Let's get married".

I do believe that at least a tiny part of the reason behind why Asuna replied "Yes" without even a trace of hesitation was thanks to the divine protection of that house.

Part 2

And, so.

It's been a night since the proposal, it's the twenty-fourth of October, sometime after 2 PM. Asuna and I visited the twenty-second floor together.

We called upon the Knights of the Blood headquarters in Grandum, on the fifty-fifth floor yesterday and have already settled the request for both of us to temporarily withdraw. Even if it's temporary, we properly left the guild system-wise, with the guild emblem, the red cross, not existing on our color cursors any longer.

We exited the teleport gate at the main town, Coral Village, and as we walked towards the large lake to the southwest, I casually asked Asuna at my side.

"Hey, how long has it been since you joined the KoB, Asuna?"

"Let's see..."

Shaking her chestnut-colored hair, the fencer lightly tilted her head.

"I think the leader invited me in February last year, so... it would be close to a year and a half, I guess. It was right after the boss battle on the twenty-fifth floor ended, so..."

"I see... The KoB was made right after half of the «Force» got annihilated, wasn't it..."

I glanced up at the underside of the floor above.

Three floors above this peaceful one was the twenty-fifth floor of Aincrad that ended up being the next true trial for the players of the clearing group, ever since the first floor.

Abnormally strong mobs, compared to those on the twenty-fourth floor, obstructed our progress immediately after we left the main city and the field's topography was as complex as a maze; its difficulty created multiple casualties even while we were en route towards the next town. There were barely any NPCs we could obtain information from, while on the other hand, there were plenty of pitfall terrain traps which led to poisonous swamps and by the time we somehow managed to reach the labyrinth tower on foot, the clearing group players were at the end of their rope.

We roused ourselves with all the spirit we could muster, and the one who motivated everyone was the player who led the guild, «Aincrad Liberation Corps»—that's right, it wasn't a «Liberation Force» yet, back then—who was named Kibaou. His wanton cursing of everyone in that Kansai dialect got them into the mood through those "You bastard!" lines, empowering them to get back onto their feet.

However. That was how Kibaou, who was unmistakably regarded as the leader of the entire clearing group back then, got hooked onto false information spread by someone with the twenty-fifth floor's boss battle right before him. With only forty or so guild members that couldn't even make up an entire raid group, they rushed into the boss room first. As a result, over half of the Liberation Corps died... and the main force of the clearing group, inclusive of Asuna and me, finally caught up to them at that point, and although we didn't escape without quite a number of casualties as well, we managed to take the monstrous boss down somehow.

But the joy from crossing Aincrad's quarter point was lacking in everyone. The boss room was permeated in the cries of resentment from Kibaou, echoing throughout the place.

That was where he parted from the clearing group, bringing along the comrades who were still alive, he left for the first floor on the distant bottom. And thus, they merged with the mutual aid organization, «MMO Today», active in the Starting City—it was from that huge congregation, that the «Force» was eventually formed.

"...The entire clearing group certainly was in a state of despair at that point... The ones fighting on the front lines were suddenly reduced to two-thirds of what they were and no one even found out who was to blame for setting up that trap, so I guess that was only to be expected. ...Everyone had sullen expressions even on the first field boss strategy meeting on the twenty-sixth floor... but, that was when the newly-formed guild, KoB, proudly marched in. All of the members were fortified in customized white and red equipment; that really had an impact, huh..."

As we walked on the lake's bank, I recollected what had happened back then and spoke about them in halting sentences. However, the one at my side kept awfully quiet, so I turned to take a glance and strangely enough, Asuna was growing red at her cheeks and subtly looking elsewhere. I snickered in my mind and continued on, pretending not to notice.

"...Especially that sub-leader who stood at the head of the group; all of us... putting Klein and I aside, even Agil was mesmerized, you know. An outfit that was the exact opposite of all of those plain ones till then, that pure white sleeveless bodice with that deep red miniskirt and those white knee highs to top things off... in that single moment, how should I say this, the hearts of those clearing group that were becoming divided all came together and..."

Smack! And a blunt-type attack came flying at my left shoulder, stopping just short of causing damage and interrupted my words. When I took a look, that particular sub-leader had her face in a shade of deep red and her right hand clenched into a fist.

"Geez! Honestly, that time was incredibly embarrassing, you know! I thought that the leader would naturally be at the front, but then with his usual composure, he went, 'I believe we could achieve a much greater effect if Asuna-kun were to stand at the front', having that serious look on, so I went out there in despair!"

"Ha-Hah... —That reminds me, that equipment really was custom-tailored, right? Who came up with the design?"

".....All of the other guild members held meetings for the design countless times while keeping it a secret from me. When they first showed it to me, I rejected it with a 'I can't wear something like this!' and was told, 'The cost of even a single set of this was colossal!' by Daizen-san with tears in his eyes, so I had no choice but to..."

"...I-I see."

It seems that even the guild, Knights of the Blood, said to be truly the strongest with their ironclad rules, were up to pretty humorous antics at the start. That said, there was no mistaking how the debut of the KoB increased the morale of the entire clearing group at that time and have always stood at the front lines of this death game ever since then. —Even at this very moment, parties with figures clad in red and white must be carrying out fierce battles on the seventy-fifth floor, opened not so long ago...

I glanced up at the underside of the upper floor once more. It seems Asuna had read my inner thoughts from merely that. While gently holding onto my left hand with her now unclenched right hand, she spoke.

"You defeated the seventy-fourth floor's boss mostly by yourself, Kirito-kun. You barely had even two or three pixels left in your HP bar. Even if you get away from the clearing for a little while, no one would complain."

"...If the reason for my break were to be exposed, I'll probably get complaints from everyone around, though."

I gave that retort sprinkled with laughter and returned Asuna's gesture. The sub-leader showed an expression unsure of whether to get angry or embarrassed and I gave a short chuckle.

After going about halfway round a large lake, with a diameter of likely one kilometer, noticeably imposing Japanese cedar—or at least, coniferous trees that looked like them, were sprouting up high. When stared at closely from somewhere near those grand roots, the wide path of the lake shore could be seen splitting into a thin, narrow path heading southwest.

"...You found this path? You sure are just as observant of these sorts of hidden routes as always."

I took those thoughts as a compliment and puffed out my chest.

"Back then, I didn't even have «Detection» Mob from the Searching skill, so I found it with only my eyes and instincts. You can see the house right after climbing that hill."

With that, Asuna's face beamed with joy in an instant as well, this time.

"I wonder what the house is like, I'm really looking forward to it! Let's hurry!"

"......Hey, Asuna-san, it's really a log house with nothing unusual, so even if you anticipate it that much, nothing will..."

"Well, it has always been my dream to live in a log house ever since I was small. I would be totally, completely and absolutely satisfied if it just has a Russian stove[2] and a rocking chair!"

Asuna quickly climbed the hill as she spoke, making me chase after her in a hurry. A rocking chair can just be bought from a furniture store, but really now, I can't possibly be expected to recall if there was a Russian stove. No, it's not definite that there wasn't one. The reason why I found the log house just ahead a year and a half before was for the sake of this very day. If this is the guidance of fate, there must be a Russian stove there as well.

While praying for the existence of a chimney atop the log house's roof, I ascended the hill several seconds after Asuna. I moved beside Asuna, who was standing still in silence and searched for a chimney with my eyes opened wide.

——However.

It wasn't there.

Not the chimney.

What spanned out before our eyes was a round space covered in verdant undergrowth, without even a single man-made object of any sort... in other words, the house itself did not exist.

Part 3

This is the wrong place.

That was the most reasonable explanation, so I apologized to Asuna and descended the hill, searching the fields nearby for two hours.

However, not only was there no log house, I wasn't even able to find any other forks leading to a new small path. Climbing up the first hill another time in melancholy, I gazed through the surrounding landscape yet again.

".....It was here, definitely..."

My voice unthinkingly escaped from my mouth.

A broad, lawny garden (merely empty land without a house though), within which a dense forest of coniferous trees stretches out; the towering pillars that support the outer circumference of Aincrad were visible beyond the grove of trees and at the very end was the infinite sky extending forever. This view remained fresh in my memory despite the gap of one and a half year.

But that particular crucial log house did not exist. I doubt it would have any effect, but even after I tried stepping into that blank space and walking to its absolute middle, the house showed no sign of spawning.

As I stood there frozen in a daze, the crunching sound of someone stepping over the undergrowth closed in, stopping right behind me.

I couldn't bear to turn around. Let's move to a log house on the twenty-second floor, just the two of us; those were the words of my proposal. If that house did not exist, wouldn't the marriage proposal itself seem like a sham?

"Asuna... —It's true. That house really was here."

It happened when I feebly spoke that line out, with my eyes lowered.

Cutting in right before me, Asuna slapped down onto my shoulders before she held my face within her palms, raising it up. Those hazel eyes were no different from usual, shimmering with a gentle light.

"I do believe you, isn't that obvious?"

She gave that simple declaration, released her hands, took a few steps back and continued.

"It must have been demolished due to some sort of circumstances with the system. It's a pity, but still, it's a very lovely place even without the house, so I'm glad that I got you to bring me here, really."

She spun around atop the emerald grass, her skirt fluttering. The scene of the afternoon rays of sunlight shining upon her long hair and silver bosom, reflecting off what hung at her waist, the glittering sheath of the rapier, «Lambent Light», was practically beautiful enough to be used for a promotional video for the game without requiring any editing.

—And I doubt she read that thought of mine, but after Asuna stopped to face me, she knocked on the belt pouch at the right side of her waist and spoke.

"Hey, we came all this way, so let's take some photos to commemorate it. I brought a photo crystal along."

"Ah, aah... That's right..."

I responded with a smile, but perhaps sensing something from my voice and expression, there appears to be traces of concern on Asuna's face.

"Was it that much of a shock? That the house disappeared..."

"Eh, no, not really, it wasn't really..."

I kept my face and hands as composed as still water, but the anxiety did not leave Asuna's expression. If this is how things are, it wouldn't be possible to simply smooth over my inner thoughts anymore, so I gave up and nodded.

"Well... I thought of various things for today in my own way. But it wouldn't work out without the house here, so..."

"Oh? Like what?"

It was difficult explaining with those large eyes staring at me so intently, but there was no use in getting embarrassed now after I've even proposed to her. After lightly clearing my throat, I tried to first enter the explanation system-wise.

"Let's see. «Marriage» in SAO is rather simple if you just consider the method. Switching to the Communication tab from the Main Menu, pressing the Marriage button at the bottom of the various invitation options and then target the other party... with that, it's finished if the other party presses the OK button. There's no need to even send any documents to the government office..."

"You wouldn't even have to give your greetings at my home, going, 'Please let me have your daughter!', huh."

As Asuna abruptly interjected with those words, I inadvertently imagined that forced event (not to mention the one who played the father role was somehow the leader of KoB, Heathcliff), making jolts run down my spine, causing me to shiver. Seeing that, the daughter... no, Asuna giggled, so after audibly clearing my throat, I returned to the main topic.

"An-Anyway! It's because the process of marrying takes only around five seconds that, well, how should I say this, I want to make it so that it'll remain in Asuna's memories forever; that's what I was thinking of. But unfortunately, we are unable to hold a grand marriage ceremony, so at the very least, I hoped to properly buy a new home and figured that it would be best getting married in front of that house, so..."

The latter half more or less ended up as murmurs while I looked downwards, but I somehow managed to finish speaking and exhaled a breath of air.

Immediately following that, I received a high-speed tackle which made me unsteady on my feet. The unexpected impact sent me falling onto my back, onto the grass, but it seemed like Asuna wasn't planning on delivering knuckle attacks after getting in a mounted position on me; she laid on my chest and gave a succinct whisper.

"......I'm happy."

"Eh, no, well, that's just what I was thinking of."

"Like I said, I'm happy. After all, Kirito-kun thought that far and tried so very hard to search for that house for me."

When I took a proper look, misty tears were running down Asuna's eyes as she grinned right before me. In response to this, I pressed my chest against her as well, wrapping her slender frame within my two arms.

We stayed that way, embracing each other for over two minutes on the grassy plains as a gentle breeze blew through, before Asuna's soft voice reverberated next to my ear.

"This is enough."

"Eh...?"

"I already feel like I'm blessed right now. So, shall we have the marriage here and head back for today? We can look for a house another time."

It's true that the afternoon rays bathing the upper floor's underside have been gaining quite the yellow tint to it. Nightfall will likely approach in another hour or two.

"I guess... you're right."

I rose gently while still hugging onto Asuna and inspected the verdant garden that grew out, as if to encircle the coniferous forest.

If we persist, we would definitely be able to find another player home that fulfils the condition of being «a detached house without monster spawns despite being outside the area, in a place with barely any visitors». It wasn't like we couldn't put a request to Argo the information broker either. Even if she's the «Rat», she wouldn't sell the coordinates to our new dwelling, probably.

Hence, like what Asuna mentioned, there was no need to get all hung up on that phantasmal log house. This lawny garden was memorable enough by itself; even if SAO were to be cleared, it should remain in Asuna's—and thus, my memory for a long time to come.

.....However.

That is that, and this is this. Something remained stirring in a corner of my mind, completely unrelated to the marriage. If I have to describe it, I would say it was similar to an uncleared quest, with its solution unfound despite effort put in, festering under the log window.

".....Kirito-kun?"

My gaze recoiled with a start when my name was called out all of a sudden. Before I knew it, the thought, «I can tell exactly what you're thinking», showed itself on Asuna's expression right before my sight and my body stiffened up once again.

"Y-Yes?"

"...You were probably thinking, that is that and this is this, or something like that, weren't you."

Gulp.

A face that suited that particular emotion seemed likely to form, hence I seized the initiative of making a poker face.

"Eh, ju-just what would you be talking about?"

"I understand, you know. About your desire to find out the reason behind the disappearance of the house that was supposed to be here, at least."

—And so, it appears that I possessed no talent for poker. Denying it any further in this situation would simply deepen the humiliation as I have already learnt, so I acknowledged it with a nod as well.

"Well, that is to say, yes... Y-You see, it's way too strange, having a player home vanish by itself and all. You said that it was due to circumstances in the system earlier, but there aren't any GMs in SAO, so it's impossible for it to have been demolished through the management's instructions. Even if it's said to be the result of a program performing a cleanup, it's not like a house with unlimited durability could rot and neither earthquakes nor volcanoes occur in Aincrad... also, as for any of the other possible causes... let's~see..."

I was about to enter my usual conjecture mode as I spoke, but Asuna's index finger shot forward onto my mouth.

"Alright, pause! ...Well, we've been together for a long time. I understand that you aren't one to leave something like that alone, at least..."

Before she could finish her light sigh, I cancelled our poses.

"Th-Then, I know this is our precious break time, but could I... have just a little time to investigate?

Asuna softly went on about how she knew it would turn out like this and how it would just change the whole point of us coming, before taking in a deep breath of air and announcing thus.

"You'll only get until the end of tonight to investigate!"

Part 4

Among the countless terrain objects distributed over each floor of Aincrad, over ninety-nine percent of them possess the «immortal» attribute. It's applied over those from nature, such as rocks and trees, as well as those man-made, like houses and castle walls, shielding them from purposeful destruction by players.

Depending on the dungeon's design, there could be «destructible walls» inside them every now and then, while «smashable rocks» and «fellable trees» could be found in the field, even if they're rare, but I have never even heard of stories involving «breakable houses». In the first place, on the very day a person were to buy a house that could be broken, a huge hole would be suddenly created while that person sleeps, with those from orange guilds flocking in through there... even such a scenario could occur. It's not like we're in the "Three Little Pigs" here.

And thus, I could hardly imagine that the disappearance of that personal home, that log house I have once found and dreamt of, was due to destruction caused by players.

"...Well, that's what I believe too."

Upon hearing what I had conjectured so far, Asuna nodded once and continued.

"Unless someone discovered an extra skill like «Land Speculation», that is."

"Th-There's no point in doing any of that in a place like this, is there? The lake shore at Salemburg is another story, though."

"Aah, it's true that the lakeside's expensive there. It's going for three times the cost of my room. ...But that's right, if we can't find the house here, having a detached house there as our new home might be nice."

"Th-That's kind of... that might be tough with my income..."

It's a joke, a joke, Asuna told me as she laughed at me, who had turned pale, for a short while before her expression tensed up. Half of it switched over to the clearing group's commander mode as she stared at the empty land fixedly.

"In that case, let's eliminate the possibility that someone demolished it. ...Just to confirm, but the exterior and roof of player homes are outside of the range of customization, right?"

"Eh... what do you mean?"

"Look, when you buy a house, you gain control over the Customize Menu exclusive to its owner, don't you? You can install and remove furniture from there, can't you?"

Finally understanding what Asuna was getting at, I nodded.

"I see... the possibility that some other player might have bought the house, then removed the walls, roof and flooring through Customize to make it into an empty lot, huh. Hmm... I haven't lived in anything except those similar to apartments, so I haven't really seen the Customize Menu for a detached house..."

"Actually, I'm the same. ...That's right, I'll try asking Liz."

Asuna opened her Main Menu straight away and skillfully typed out a message to her bosom friend, the blacksmith, Lisbeth.

Liz was my friend, as well as the benefactor who crafted me my beloved sword, Dark Repulser, so she's in the list of those who'll be informed about the marriage between Asuna and I, one among those few players. We planned to send messages to ten or so people, including Liz, right after we're done

with buying a house here and the marriage procedures—but to think it would become a discussion over residential issues instead.

It appears that she received a reply immediately and after Asuna's eyes raced through the words on the window only she could see, she gave a curt nod.

"It looks like that the exterior and roof can't be removed or moved. Changing the colors or adding objects like bay windows or flower beds seems possible if you fork out a large sum of money, though..."

"...I guess even if you can change its colors, it's not like you can make the entire house transparent."

Both Asuna and I have walked all over this empty land since earlier, so it's confirmed that there weren't even any sort of traces. If there was a transparent house built here, we should have already knocked our noses into it.

"So... what about the options? Like... some device to hide it underground?"

As Asuna mentioned something like that and poked the ground with the grass at her feet with the tips of her boots, I unintentionally broke into a wry smile.

"Haha, it's not like it's the secret base of some evil organization. In the first place, if you were to dig out a hole large enough to bury a house, you'll fall right into the floor below."

"Eeh, doesn't it sound lovely. Like a home belonging to the Hobbits."

"I do recall that being digging tunnels through hills... Won't the underground be dwarfs instead? See, there was that humongous underground Dwarven castle stretching tens of storeys, wasn't there."

"I hate that place. It's damp in there and there were so many bug-type monsters appearing... in the first place, wasn't that really just the insides of a mountain in the field?"

"That's the problem with Aincrad's structure, there's a limit to the thickness of the ground, so a true to form, gigantic, RPG underground labyrinth can't be made."

"It's fine not having something like that! ...Rather, are you fine with this? Chatting and all. I'm enjoying myself, so I don't mind, though."

Having it pointed out by Asuna, I turned to look towards the outer circumference with a start. Scattered, wispy clouds gently flowed through a sky of deepening orange. It'll probably get dark if you give it another two hours.

"Th-That's right, let me see, if it's not transparent or some secret base, next would be... a mobile base? Nah, if there was an object like that, it would be a piece of cake to reach the labyrinth from the main town... so I guess an aerial fortress's out too, huh..."

At my words that drifted from guesses to delusions, Asuna looked up at the skies with a stumped look. On the other hand, I gazed downwards profoundly and continued earnestly pondering over the matter with my arms crossed.

"It doesn't look like it vanished through the Customize function. To begin with, that would mean that some other player had already bought it... So I guess it's really a phenomenon unrelated to players..."

"......Hey."

"That means... a field boss capable of breaking apart terrain objects...? Nah, even the fifty-sixth floor's «GeoCrawler» couldn't break through the village's gates. If such a ridiculous boss appears on the twenty-second floor, there would have been a rapid call to arms for a subjugation raid..."

"Hey, c'mon, Kirito-kun."

With Asuna tugging away at my cloak's sleeve, I broke off my conjectures and looked at her.

"...What is it?"

"......That."

Asuna had her right hand, fitted in a long, white glove, raised up, so I trailed the direction her index finger pointed towards with my sight.

It was there, in the space right above a conspicuously large Japanese cedar tree, north of the empty area.

Hovering unsteadily at a height almost touching the underside of the next floor, there was a single detached house— Although nearly nothing but its underside could be seen from the ground due to the angle, there was no mistake that it was the log house I was seeking, judging by its structure that was formed by a number of splendid logs.

Despite the joy in finding the house without much difficulty, the surprise from it floating ninety meters above my head overshadowed that, leaving me muttering in bewilderment.

"......Wh-Why is... the house flying......"

"......Like what you said earlier, Kirito-kun, an option for an aerial fortress... guess that's not it, huh..."

Following what Asuna mentioned, I concentrated on looking through each section of the house, appearing as small as specks from here, but there doesn't seem to be any wings, balloons or propellers attached to it.

On the other hand, I noticed two other new things with my sight enhanced through a skill.

Firstly, there was a shimmering swirl of air much like heat haze underneath the house. That log house was likely airborne by being on something similar to a «tornado fixed in position».

And the other issue.

A face timidly poking out from one of the house's windows facing south and a hand frantically waving at us, who were far away on the distant bottom; there was someone there.

"Th-There's a person there."

After I pointed it out, Asuna went "Eh" before she leaned her body forward.

"Y-You're right. ...We really can't tell whether it's a NPC or a player from this distance..."

The only definite difference between a player and a NPC in terms of outward appearance was limited to the color of the «Color Cursor». However, with this much distance in between, the color cursor wouldn't even show up.

I still had no idea whatsoever as to why the house was flying, but if that figure was not a NPC, but a player, there was no way we could leave that alone. After all, even if it's a one in a million chance, anyone's HP would definitely turn to zero if they were to fall from that height.

"Wh-Which is it..."

It happened as Asuna and I held our breaths while gazing upwards—

Suddenly, the hand that the figure was waving about withdrew, before thrusting out once more. The hand released something it held, gleaming as it reflected the rays of the yellow sunlight. It drew a slow arc in the air as it fell towards the empty land we stood on.

"Wo.... wo-woah..."

After I got to its endpoint with four strides to the right and three quick steps forward, I caught the small object with my hands. As Asuna immediately rushed after me, both of us examined it in closer detail.

"A bottle of recovery potion... that has already been used...?"

I nodded at Asuna's remark before turning up to look at the log house floating in the sky once more, and shouted.

"—It's a player!"

An empty potion bottle drained dry of its content will break apart in ten seconds if left alone and vanish. To prevent that and store it as an «Empty Bottle» item, it has to be put away into any sort of bag, or perhaps the item storage at least once. That's not an action taken by NPCs, so the possession of an empty bottle would mean that the one trapped in that flying house is a player.

"W-We have to help..."

I spoke with the small bottle held in my right hand and Asuna instantly pointed out.

"H-How do we!?"

"....."

That was a truly natural question. In Aincrad, no, in SAO, the means for players to take flight generally do not exist. If there were such a thing, one could ignore the labyrinth tower and head for the next floor... no, they could reach the final goal, the hundredth floor, in just a single flight, after all.

Several months ago, I did go through the experience of grabbing onto a white dragon's tail and flying alongside Lisbeth, the smith that Asuna sent a message to earlier, but we couldn't choose where to go, there aren't any dragons on this floor, and above all, I have no desire to go through that a second time.

".....F-For now, let's try going directly below the house."

Asuna flashed a doubtful look at my thoughtless suggestion, but soon nodded.

As we stepped into the forest from the empty space, the forever overlapping branches above blocked the flying house from our view, but I walked straight ahead with a skill not part of the system, «Intuitively Walking Straight». In the forest with no landmarks for my eyes to latch onto, it was unexpectedly difficult. The trick to it is to move your legs as though they're executing an autorun... which was how I explained to Asuna the other time, although she just gave a look wondering what the heck was I going on about.

Our aim was true and after merely two or three minutes since we started moving, a remarkably gigantic Japanese cedar tree came into our sight. This was unmistakably that tree growing directly under the house. Scanning upwards as I approached, I looked through the many overlapping branches, allowing me to confirm the silhouette of a lazily hovering speck.

"...So, what can we do? Even if we climb this cedar, it doesn't look like we can reach the house at all, you know?"

A question from Asuna while she walked with her view in the skies and a reply from me in the same posture.

"I thought a shout might reach if we were to get right below it, but... that doesn't seem possible either..."

"I see, if we could talk, we could receive an explanation for what happened, huh. Maybe we should really climb the tree? Shouting from the treetop might provide enough range."

"But you see, it's tough climbing coniferous trees like this... Without the «Acrobatics» skill, it might be pretty precarious..."

It happened then, when we got within five meters or so from the huge cedar with our faces pointed upwards.

A mob's howl roared out at point-blank range, catching us unaware and we sprang up.

"Woof, woof woof woof!!"

I instinctively held on to the grip of my beloved sword, Elucidator, hanging on my back, but ceased that motion there. The reason for that was because the originator of that howl was a quadrupedal beast, with a length of approximately forty centimeters... or to be specific, a «dog».

Its relatively long coat was of a pale tawny color, its eyes big and round, with a blue ribbon on its fluffy tail to boot. The color cursor showed yellow—a color for NPCs, the pets of beast tamers, or perhaps a non-active monster that hasn't been aggro-ed.

"Wah, how cute!"

As Asuna showed a reaction befitting a girl of her age, she squatted and tried to reach out with her hand, causing me to restrain her in a panic.

"Ho-Hold on, hold on!"

"Why should I, it's so cute."

"I-It might be some sort of trap, you know! In the first place, it's strange having a dog in the field. What will you do if it morphs into a Dire Wolf or something the moment you touch it."

"Geez, it's fine, look, even its tail is wagging so much."

—And during our exchange, the small dog continued its din, insisting "Hug me, hug me!" as it bounced about and barked in front of Asuna. While I grabbed and held onto Asuna's sword belt when she was about to squat down again, I checked the whelp's cursor once more. The name displayed was «Toto».

"...Toto? That shouldn't be a species name... is it a name unique to this dog...?"

"Wah, the name's cute too! C'mon, come here, Toto!"

"Like I said, you shouldn't..."

While I frantically tried to bring back Asuna, who was at a level of tension as if she was already afflicted with a Charmed negative status, I attempted to see through the whelp's, no, Toto's full, round eyes, searching for any fiendish schemes it might be concealing.

Then, I noticed that, though belated. Floating around two centimeters atop the dog's round head, a small «?» mark.

"Hey... a quest mark!? But why is it in progress...?"

It seems that Asuna noticed the mark too, after my shout, and the vigor she showed earlier dwindled.

"You're right, there's a question mark on it, huh..."

The number of quests given out in each of Aincrad's floors was practically endless. They can generally be received from NPCs with «!» marks floating above them, while NPCs related to a quest in progress have that mark changed to a «?».

In other words, that would mean that this pup was a key person, or rather, a key animal for a quest in progress. But the problem is... I have absolutely no recollection of receiving a quest related to dogs and it's likely the same for Asuna, so...

"Th-That's it!"

I ended up releasing Asuna's belt due to her sudden cry. The rapier-user spun around and continued with an intense gaze on me.

"We always end up having to deal with the clearing of the labyrinth and floor bosses normally, so we don't take up many sub-quests, right? That's why it ended up as a blind spot in our thoughts. If some sort of unexplainable, strange phenomenon happens, the cause is usually a quest. Like... a house flying in the sky, for example!"

"......I see."

I nodded as it was a plausible deduction and Asuna twirled about once again, facing the tyke that was still making a din.

"That is to say, if we want to find out what's behind the flying house... we would definitely have no other path than to go into contact with Toto-chan here! I know you'll understand, Kirito-kun!"

And, with that speech that wasn't exactly completely devoid of adventurous spirit and willingness for self-sacrifice depending on how it's interpreted, Asuna squatted down without giving me a chance to seize her and reached her two hands out to the runt.

"Woof woof woof!"

The small, tawny dog leapt into Asuna's chest with a delighted yap, licking her face while it rapidly wagged its tail.

"Ahaha, that tickles! Haah, it's so cute! I've always dreamed of keeping a puppy like this!"

—Fortunately, it doesn't seem that Toto will be transforming into a huge, man-eating wolf all of a sudden.

However, the phenomenon that occurred several seconds later was beyond my expectations by approximately three light years.

Without any warning, a gale blew at our feet as it spiraled around us into a swirl. The tremendous speed the wind travelled at left no opportunity for us to right our stances. Staggering, our feet left the ground—and frighteningly enough, could not reach the ground regardless of how hard we tried.

"Ki-Kirito-kun!"

I instinctively caught onto Asuna's extended left hand while she was holding onto Toto with her right. And that was how we, two persons and one animal, were whisked away in a constrained tornado. The surrounding scenery swung by us in dizzying circles while my coat's hem fluttered about prominently along with Asuna's miniskirt (a phenomenon that would never happen with the usual amount of wind in the fields), but the situation certainly didn't allow me the composure to focus on that.

"Wa-Waa-Waaah~", I screamed;

"Kyaaaa—", Asuna shrieked;

"Woof woof woof!!", the whelp happily barked, and that was when it happened.

We soared upwards, making a beeline for the log house that was suspended up in the air far above.

Part 5

"...I-It's completely pointless if you come here toO![3]"

And that was the first line from the player who asked for help in the log house.

Approximately ninety seconds ago—

Asuna, the dog and me were swallowed into the small tornado and flew above the roof of the flying log house, then sucked into an open chimney at its corner, one after another. Beyond the dark, narrow tunnel was a spacious living room with a plain wood finishing and an astounded female player stood alone before us, who landed on our bums.

To re-activate her head that was frozen by the stunning turn of events, I stared intently at the prior visitor while sitting on the floor. Surprisingly, her face was one I was extremely acquainted with, but as I didn't have the energy to express my shock yet again, I tried saying some greetings.

"Good day. Long time no see."

And that was how the exclamation from earlier came about.

One way or another, we should first exchange our information.

And that female player agreed and loosened the tension in her shoulders at my suggestion, pointing at the round table set up on the living room's floor with her right hand. After Asuna, still clutching onto the dog, and I sat down side-by-side, the girl took a seat as well, a large distance away, on the opposite side.

It seems Asuna had finally returned to her usual mode by this time and greeted the female player who was a mutual acquaintance of ours.

"It's been a while, Argo-san."

"...Hello, Aa-chan. And you too, Ki-bou."

Patterns of three whiskers were distinctly painted onto each of the cheeks of this female player who waved her hand nimbly with a delicate expression on. The name of this girl who stuck to this face paint for roughly the two years since the start of the death game, no, adding one month on when including the beta period, was «Argo the Rat». Aincrad's most resourceful information broker.

She was an associate of Asuna and I since the starting of the game, selling and buying information from us countless times. Aside from that, we have saved and gotten saved by each other on several occasions, but there were clearly no feelings of antagonism between us. Hence, it doesn't make sense for Argo to display caution towards us like what she was doing now of all times, but let's just put that aside and get to the main topic.

"——So. Argo, what exactly happened?"

This was a question asked as I waved my right hand around, indicating the entire log house which was radically flying, even now, and the information broker's two eyes blinked incessantly deep within her golden auburn curly hair.

"What you ask, Ki-bou, if you've gotten in 't this far, you should've gotten 't too, righT? It's a quesT, a quesT!"

"Ah, aah... well..."

When I glanced at the tyke dozing off while held at Asuna's chest, the ? mark above its head was lit up. In other words, it meant that some sort of quest was in progress, but—

"But rather than receiving a quest, it clearly feels like we've been dragged into one, you know..."

I said that and Asuna gave a curt nod as well.

"That's right. We got blown here merely by me picking up this kid, after all. How should I say this... it's like I picked up a quest that someone left behind halfway, that's what it feels... like..."

Her mouth suddenly shut close after saying that and she met my glance. I instantly realized what the girl had figured out.

If «a quest that someone left behind halfway» was what brought around this situation, the one responsible could be no one other than this Argo the Rat right before our eyes.

Argo lowered her head as though she understood what was up when Asuna's and my sight flicked towards her simultaneously, and spoke.

"......I'll start from the beginninG."

—Recently, I got the information that several strange new quests have been occurring on the lower floors of AincraD. Like a masked ogre that revives over and over again even when defeated, or a jump spinning, fire-breathing tortoise, or a white-clothed female undead creeping out from a cursed message windoW.

—'Twouldn't be possible to publish the «Complete Quest Walkthrough Guide Book» if I didn't get information on the new quests immediately. That's why, the day before yesterday, I came to investigate this southwestern area of the twenty-second floor, where there were rumors of a new quest and 'twas fine until I succeeded in finding the quest's starting point, but there was a slight complication with the quest's descriptioN. When I leapt into this house without bringing along the key character required to proceed with the story, the house was suddenly engulfed in a tornado, totally surprising mE!

And that's why for the two days after that, I was stuck inside this flying house, waiting for someone to reset this quesT.

When her explanation reached that point, Argo spread her arms out in exasperation.

«Resetting a quest» was the action of returning a partially-finished quest that has been left alone for a long time to its initial state, through a menu operation. There were quests that couldn't be taken up by other players at the same time in SAO, though few, so such a mechanism was prepared. Of course, you would have to first get close to the NPC who was the starting point, though.

In other words, if we opened the Quest tab in the Main Menu when we noticed that ? mark above the head of that pup, «Toto», below that cedar tree, the reset button—might have been there. However, now that we got on the quest, neither Asuna nor I would be able to reset.

"...Well, I more or less understand the situation now, but... there are still parts I don't get. Argo, what did you mean by the 'complication with the quest's description' earlier?"

When I voiced out the doubt that naturally came to me, the information broker made the aforementioned delicate expression and sneaked glances at Asuna... or to be specific, the small, moving object sleeping in Asuna's arms.

"W-Well, that'S... even I have things I'm good at and those that I'm not reallY..."

"Aah, so that's it. Argo-san, so you're bad with dogs!"

And in that moment, Asuna completely saw through her with a smile on which caused the three whiskers on the information broker's cheeks to narrow.

"I-I can't help 'T, that's just how my base stats werE! And Aa-chan, I heard the news that you're bad with Astral-type mobs toO!"

"Th-That's because those are ghosts! It's only natural to be scared of ghosts. But puppies are cute, you know? Here, how about you try hugging it?"

"St-Stop 't! Just let 't continue sleeping therE!"

—And leaving aside Argo and Asuna, who were showing their intimacy through their actions, I took some time to ponder.

If Argo (despite being a «Rat») was bad with dogs, the fact that the quest in progress mark atop the dog's head was lit up means...

"Hahah, I get it. Argo, you managed to start the quest, but with the key character being a dog, you dashed away with all your AGI and after you jumped into this house, the quest continued making you fly up, but got stuck because the dog couldn't enter the house, getting you trapped here in the sky for two whole days... that's it, huh. Hahaha, looks like you've been through a pretty fun experience, huh. If you put stories of your experiences in a book like, "Argo's Great Adventures", in the future, it'll sell."

Upon hearing my talk while laughing, the Rat momentarily made a face that said, "Will it really selL?" before she shouted.

"'Tis no laughing matter, Ki-bou! With things this way, both Aa-chan and you are stuck now too, you know!"

"Don't make such a fuss about it, at the most, we'll just have to use a teleport crystal to travel to some other city, right?"

It happened just as I was about to start laughing again after replying so—an odd expression appeared on Argo's and Asuna's faces at the same time. They exchanged a quick glance and Asuna took the initiative to open her mouth.

"...Hey, Kirito-kun. I don't think there's any chance that Argo-san hasn't tried that out yet."

"Heh?"

"It depends on the quest, but during these compulsory events, most of them prevent teleporting, don't they? Right, Argo-san?

"Of course 't does!"

"......Seriously?"

Seeing me finally breaking out in a cold sweat, Argo replied with a nod and an expression that seemed to show her disappointment.

"Well, as a last resort, there's always still jumping out from the window and teleporting immediately before crashing into the ground... I don't quite want to try that, really."

"I-I don't want to do it either, really..."

I took a peek out at the sky extending out beyond the window and realized something after all that side-tracking.

In the first place, what exactly happened on this quest. If one were to receive the quest from the dog in the forest and enter the house together, the house will take flight through the tornado? The links

between each part of the story make too little sense at this point. The ones in charge of the SAO game servers' administration should have already been separated from Argus, the developers, so it's not like the quest's scenario could have been written by staff from Argus. In that case, exactly who was one who thought up these illogical developments? And at the present moment when the GM Call does not function, how can we escape from this stuck status...?

".....Wait, hold on, now that I think about it."

Asuna, who was stroking Toto's head, and Argo, who was looking in that direction with a wary glance, turned in unison at my words.

"If the reason why this quest got stuck was because the dog... Toto was left behind on the ground, that should have been dealt with already... —So, doesn't that mean that the quest should have been back in motion...?"

"Ah...!"

Argo snapped her fingers and dashed right beside the window in a breakneck motion. She looked down towards the ground and instantly shouted.

"W-We're moving! Or rather, it looks we're nearly going to land!"

"R-Really!? Thank goodness, looks like we'll be able to go back before it gets dark."

Asuna spoke, relieved while looking towards the windows as well, but I couldn't be as optimistic. You could call it a hunch.

Having an introduction of making an entire house take flight was rather major as a quest. A story that starts this flashy was unlikely to end so easily. In all likelihood, it would make us go this way to search for something, go that way to help someone out... I believe such a development would definitely happen. First of all, even if we work hard at clearing the quest, there was no guarantee that this log house will return to its previous status of being on sale. In that case, would Asuna and I really be able to marry...

"Ugh."

I gave a weak moan and took a look at Argo's meager frame from behind as she kept a subtle distance away from (the dog within the arms of) Asuna.

She was an old friend of mine, but there was no way I could let her find out about my marriage with Asuna before it happened. If the cat gets out of the bag, an article will end up on the newspaper, «Weekly Argo», with a flourish and I will be cursed to death by everyone in Asuna's fan clubs.

Hence, it's risky to have her stick around for too long to complete the quest. There's no choice, but to clear it in haste and say "Good work!" before the «Rat's» nose senses something.

At roughly the same time as I got up while making up my mind, a dull sound rang out from the log house, announcing its arrival at a location unknown to us.

Part 6

"...Now that I think about it, what was the name of this quest?

Argo opened a window at my question and answered.

"«Witch of the West and the Three Treasures», 't says."

"...How common. And the build-up was so surreal too..."

It was the first time stepping onto the ground firmly for Argo in two days, whereas fifteen minutes for Asuna and me, and what stood before the three of us was the next key character shaking about as its body wobbled.

However, once again, it wasn't a human. Its torso joined into a cross by wooden poles, it was a doll with a round, stuffed head of hemp fiber—namely, a scarecrow. Despite its humorous appearance, it was a splendid monster. These were often placed in horror-type floors, a mob of the «Scarecrow» type.

What came to meet us wasn't merely the scarecrow. On the left was a hollow set of plate armor, a monster of the «Living Armor» type. And on the right was a lion head atop a human body, a monster of the «Werelion» type. None of the three showed any will to attack. The color cursor also remained as the non-active yellow status.

Just as I wondered what would happen now, the scarecrow suddenly spoke.

"Oh, we've certainly been awaiting you!"

Those words prompted the «!» mark floating above the scarecrow's head to change into a «?», denoting a quest in progress. At the same time, the mark vanished from the pup's head.

"Awaiting... you say?"

I gave an appropriate reply in the meantime and the scarecrow launched into a tirade, accompanied by violent swaying of its head. To sum it up, the contents are as follows.

—We, «Scarecrow», «Tin» and «Lion», were out on a journey to become humans, but on our way, a female girl who was our companion got kidnapped by the «Witch of the West». We want to help her out, but the witch stole away what was in Scarecrow's head, the gem that was a substitute for Tin's heart and the golden mane that fuelled Lion's courage, so we are unable to battle. Thus, to enlist a swordsman able to fight the witch with us, we cast a tornado spell onto the dog the girl kept, «Toto», and sent it beyond the wall.

"Ha, hahah... I get it..."

Nodding, I took a glance behind.

According to the map, we were currently still on the twenty-second floor, in the northwest. An area sealed off by a steep cliff, unreachable by foot. The «wall» that Scarecrow referred to was likely that cliff.

I somehow understood the setup of the quest, but that did not change my assessment of the entire story as being weird. In SAO, where magic did not exist, wouldn't the problem be whether a «witch» or a «tornado spell» was even possible in the first place? And besides, putting Scarecrow and Lion aside, why exactly would the Living Armor's name be «Tin»?

—And just as I racked my brains over these, as most would agree, pointless doubts, Asuna murmured all of a sudden.

"...I get it. What this quest is supposed to be."

Continuing on, Argo nodded as well.

"I get 't too. No wonder the house went flyinG."

"Heh? What do you mean?"

I asked as I looked right and left, and Asuna grinned as she voiced out something I didn't expect at all.

"I think you should have read it when you were a child too, Kirito-kun. Bits and pieces are different if you look at it in detail, but this quest... originated from «The Wizard of Oz»!"

"...Ah, aah, I see, so that's it!"

And, that was what I shouted out, but to be honest, I couldn't recall a single thing about that tale. A girl and her pet dog were blown away by a tornado with their house and when they landed, they found themselves in a parallel world, went on adventures here and there alongside a scarecrow, a tin figure and a lion before finally returning to the real world—that was how the story went, probably.

It was now clear why the Living Armor became «Tin», but I still felt anxious about what has yet to come.

"...If that is the case, this quest is going to be horribly long, huh..."

Asuna made a questioning, "Why?", expression when she heard me voice that out with a sigh, so I shrugged my shoulders and continued.

"Well, you see, if you take a look at how it goes, we'll have to get Scarecrow's brain, Tin's heart and Lion's mane one after another, right? How long will even one of them take..."

Asuna and Argo exchanged looks at my grumbling and for some reason, smiled complacently.

"Ki-bou, you don't quite remember how the story went, do you?"

"Ugh... no, well, that's exactly it though..."

"Fufu, I doubt there's any need to collect the key items. Let's skip that and march right into the witch's castle straight away!"

"E-Eeeh!?"

I must have imagined those three faces that showed the same "Eeeh" emotion on Scarecrow, Tin and Lion, accompanying my yell.

I checked the map once again and saw that golden «!» marks (the next objective) were displayed on three parts of the elliptical quest area, with a single grey «!» mark (the final objective, but with its flag yet to be triggered) aside from those. Thinking about it normally, it would be useless even if you go to the final destination before completing the golden marks at those three places, but there was no sign of hesitation in the steps Asuna and Argo took.

The three monsters who wanted to become human and I chased, with uncertain strides, after those two who briskly proceeded through the road paved with yellow bricks. The tyke held in Asuna's arms was likely the the reason why Argo stayed a slight distance behind.

Argo and I had suggested for Toto to be left behind in the log house since it had ceased its role as a key character when the quest mark atop its head vanished. However, Asuna kept hugging onto the

dog firmly while uttering a "Uu~" with her eyes upturned, so I couldn't persist with much more than that. Personally, I don't care either way, but it seemed a little like a test of emotional strength for Argo who was apparently a dog-hating character.

If she's keeping to it that thoroughly, it must be as the person herself mentioned earlier, not simply a roleplay limited to this world alone. The Argo of the real world was definitely bad with dogs as well. However, if I was in her shoes, I wonder if I could so frankly show off my inner self—my true self. Wouldn't I forcibly keep my feelings in check, putting on a composed appearance in order to retain the image that I had built up and assumed time after time in this world?

Could those feelings for Asuna from a person like that really be called love.....?

".....What do you think?"

I asked of one of the quest NPCs who walked at my side, the lion male who had his «courage» stolen from him, in an extremely soft voice.

Most NPCs among the countless number set in Aincrad possess an algorithm that did no more than to cycle through pre-set patterns of replies, making it impossible for them to properly hold a conversation with a player. So I wasn't exactly hoping for an answer, but,

"...Was something taken from you as well?"

And the lion male gave a subdued response, so I was slightly... no, rather surprised.

"Hmm... well, that might be the case, huh. After all, I don't remember ever loving anyone for real until I came here."

When I got carried away and answered that way, the Werelion male, who looked significantly more dispirited in comparison to those it was based on, the Werelion race that appeared near the fortieth floor, nodded with a distinctively sorrowful expression.

"I see. Honestly, I don't have confidence either. In whether I really had «courage» before the witch stole my mane from me."

The lion male lowered his head with a sigh, exposing the sorry state that a portion of the mane behind his head was in, with much of it gone now as though someone went through it with a pair of clippers.

When approaching it from that angle, there were stitches at the back of Scarecrow's head, as if there was once a tear in the crudely patched up cloth, while he bounced step after step at the lion male's side and a large hole closed up by an adhesive bandage could be seen on Tin's breastplate too, as he walked ahead. Each of those was probably a relic from the time that «Witch of the West» person stole the items important to the three of them.

Of course, I have no recollection of my «heart to love others» being stolen by the witch. If I had lost that somewhere, it would be my own fault, keeping a distance away from those around me from young... even from my own family.

In that case, I wonder where I would have to search to retrieve that heart. Would I find it if I marry Asuna and live together with her? But as the lion male had said, what if it was something I didn't have from the start as a human...?

And, at that moment, as if she sensed my unease, Asuna turned back to face me from several meters in front. She tilted her head slightly to the side before showing me a smile, one no different from the usual ones she gave me. She pointed her raised right hand forward and shouted out cheerfully.

"Look, Kirito-kun, you can see it now!"

Argo clapped together the metal claws equipped on her hands without a moment's delay.

"If I didn't know about this quest, 't has to be an unexplored dungeoN! There's going to be plenty of untouched treasure chestS!"

"...Hey now, even if you say that, this is the twenty-second floor, so it's obvious there won't be anything amazing."

Cutting off the observation that was unlike me, I sped up to chase after those two while gazing up at the castle that appeared beyond a grove of trees. It had an excessive number of long, narrow towers reaching up, with its walls in a shade of grey close to black. Its towering visage with the skies blotched in a deepening red as a backdrop gave off an atmosphere fit for a «witch's castle».

This quest should be cleared if the witch who resides deep inside there was defeated, but we can't even get in the castle right now, can we? Ordinarily, if the sub-quests at each location weren't finished and Scarecrow, Tin and Lion have not gotten their mind, heart and spirit back yet, the door to the final dungeon wouldn't open or the boss wouldn't spawn. No, rather than all that, wouldn't it be a little pitiful to just ignore what those three are searching for...

Even as I pondered that issue, Asuna and Argo continued walking rapidly with that delicate distance from each other maintained, and the eerie castle gate just minutes away on our route. The black cast iron gates reaching five meters high were cleanly closed, with no sign of opening as expected—

Crack, crack, clank.

And following that distinct unlocking sound, the gates automatically opened to the sides, causing my mouth to open as well. The tyke held by Asuna was woofing away, but I doubt that was the cause of it opening.

The two female players nodded to each other as if they predicted it, but I personally didn't get it at all. Exchanging looks with Scarecrow and company, who got their brain, heart or mane stolen, I shrugged my shoulders and stepped through the gateway.

At that moment, a ferocious howl rang out and four monsters spawned within the front yard of the castle. A black panther head atop a bulky torso, they were from the Werepanther race. Witches make use of black cats, so there was no need to say that it was an appropriate choice for guards... perhaps.

"Gyaoooo!"

The panthers roared once again and the moment they unsheathed their scimitars with jagged edges, Scarecrow and the other two screamed out a shameful "Eek" and cowered down. It wasn't certain whether they were afflicted with the «Fear» negative status, or simply truly scared; I didn't expect much battle potential out of them, but if they're going to be like this from the start, I worry for them when we get to the boss battle.

I lightly shook my head and drew my beloved sword, Elucidator, from my back and concurrently targeted the two Werepanthers rushing in from my right. I activated the offensive single-hit, area of effect sword skill, «Serration Wave», of which not many exist for one-handed swords.

The sword that was brought down onto the ground vibrated at a high frequency and a light effect similar to a saw blade spread out in a radial pattern. Two of the panther males were swallowed by that and stumbled forward. It was a technique meant to impede movement to begin with, dealing barely any damage, but they were monsters appearing in a quest on the twenty-second floor, after all. Before they could right their postures, their HP got shaved away and the panthers split apart before dissipating away in succession.

The remaining two were killed by Asuna with her left hand still holding onto the tyke, and Argo who was actually pretty strong in an one-on-one situation, ending the battle in an instant. One of the panther males dropped a key with a quest item mark on it, so we used that to open a small door at the corner of the castle.

I peered at the sky another time before passing through the door; violet had started to mingle into the scarlet. It was around an hour before nightfall, huh. The castle was of quite a formidable size, so it seemed like it would be hard to clear it before sunset.

—As though reading my mind once again, Asuna pat my back and spoke.

"Don't worry, I've brought plenty of food."

No, I wasn't exactly worrying about dinner, but whether I would be able to marry you within today, Asuna.

I couldn't answer with that, so I simply nodded in an odd angle and Argo flippantly spoke out.

"I'm looking forward to thaT! I've totally caught those rumors that say Aa-chan succeeded in producing soy saucE!"

It has been merely ten minutes since we've infiltrated the castle belonging to the «Witch of the West».

Asuna, Argo, Scarecrow, Tin, Lion, that dog and me; our party of six people + one animal have reached a large door that presumably leads to the boss room in no time at all.

It's due to our battle ability level being far higher than the one suitable for the quest, but what could be considered even more unreasonable was Argo's mobility. She jumped onto balconies that really should require a detour as it was too high, or onto footholds narrow enough for even me to hesitate, with ease, taking short-cuts throughout the route. Thanks to that, there were still tinges of red in the sky from what I could see through a small window.

"...Shall we have the food after the boss battle?"

Asuna asked, seemingly rather amazed, and Argo calmly nodded with a "Guess sO". The monster trio had the usual is-this-really-alright faces on, but their representative, Scarecrow, bounced forward and the single stitch on its cloth head that served as its mouth moved.

"...The «Witch of the West» uses various terrifying spells. If only my head wasn't quite so empty, I could remember how those spells went..."

...As I thought, we really should have dealt with it in sequence through each sub-quest. That was what I thought, but Asuna pat Scarecrow's shoulder (or at least, the pole that served as it), showing no sign of worry.

"It's alright, if the three of you put your strength together, we'll definitely be able to save Do... that girl who's your friend. Now, let's go."

Finishing her speech, she turned a gallant arc towards the front and steadfastly pushed the large door open.

Inside was a rectangular, spacious area that truly gave off the feel of a boss room. The moment we stepped in, creepy green candles on the chandelier attached to the high ceiling lit up. Our viewpoints gradually grew brighter, allowing us to spot a big cage placed near the wall on the other side.

The captured young girl collapsed in the cage—beside her, a black-clothed hag stirred away at an enormous, simmering pot with a long ladle.

"Ooh... that's a witchy witch..."

My thoughts unintentionally escaped. Offensive magic generally do not exist in SAO, thus there was the belief that magicians do not exist as well, so that would make a monster with a design like that remarkably rare.

Now then, what kind of attack would that granny use? Just as I was in the midst of wondering that—Scarecrow gave a sudden shout.

"Oh, Dorothy-san! Dorothy-san will turn into soup at this rate!"

Continuing on was the noise from each parts of Tin's clattery armor.

"Dorothy, danger, let's help, hurry!"

Finally, Lion tried his best to bristle a part of his closely-cropped mane.

"Hold on, Dorothy! We'll immediately... we'll...."

But at that point, Lion's mane shriveled, Tin's armor muted, and Scarecrow's shaft bent.

Replacing the trio who sunk into silence, Asuna, Argo and I stepped forward. Looking at the witch who continued stirring the big pot from her side, we approached with caution.

The black-robed witch raised her face and looked this way. Her eyes thinning into a complacent expression as they shone yellow, she muttered in a high-pitched voice.

"Wouldn't the lot of you like to drink the soup this kid makess? One mouth will return your youth, two will endow you with power; it's such a delicious, delicious soup, you know? Yii-hi-hi-hi."

If we were to carelessly answer "Yes" here, we might just proceed straight to a forced event where the girl who seems to be called Dorothy ends up simmering in the pot, so I yelled a reply back.

"No! We're here to help that child!"

"I seee, I seee, what a pityy. In that case..."

That was when the witch scooped out some of what was in the pot with the ladle before vigorously exhaling.

"...I'll make the whole lot of you soup too! Yiii~hi-hi~~~!"

Along with that shriek, she splattered the contents of the pot towards us. That converted into a mist dyed a venomous-looking purple, enveloping all of us.

At the moment, a green-framed debuff icon lit up below my HP bar at the top-left of my sight. Paralysis.

"Geh..."

Without even the time to moan, Asuna, Argo, Scarecrow and the rest collapsed onto the ground with me. For all three high levels to be unable to resist, this must be a forced paralysis event, but that doesn't change the peril of this situation. I rushed to retrieve a cure potion from my pouch, but somehow, even my right hand, which should normally be able to move when paralyzed, was numb.

"Hi-hi-hi... no~ow then, who shall be the first one to be boiledd..."

While waving around the ladle that served as a replacement for a magic wand, the witch approached in a dance-like motion. This might actually be pretty bad, I thought, desperately trying to stand, but my body was utterly incapable of movement.

"Yihihi, it's no use, it's no use. Nothing can break this spell aside from a lion's roar."

—Oh, I see.

I shifted my vision at that terribly obvious hint, somehow managing to take a look behind. Scarecrow and Tin certainly were paralyzed like us, but Lion alone did not have a debuff icon. If he were to go "gao" and roar just once, the paralysis for all of us should be cured.

It should, but.

Great. Lion was cowering down and trembling with his arms hugging his head, his mane laid completely flat. Hey hey, I retorted in my mind before finally realizing.

This was inevitable. His «courage» was still with the witch. This wouldn't have been acceptable if we've finished that sub-quest, reclaiming the golden mane that was the source of his courage, but there was no way he could rise up in the current circumstances. It was a predictable outcome, so why exactly did both Asuna and Argo think that there was no need to go about doing the three sub-quests—

"Woof, woof woof woof!"

And, the energetic tyke's barks rang out, interrupting my thoughts.

That wasn't all that stopped. Lion's shivering made a sudden stop as well, and its mane that would lose to no other at shriveling up was gradually swelling up, wasn't it. Why. His courage should have been lost.

Lying on the ground, I opened my eyes and watched as Lion picked himself up slowly. He had his usual droopy face, but a light definitely shone within those two eyes of his.

"I... I am here to help Dorothy!"

He strongly shouted that out and sucked in the air, inhaling his chest to a large extent—Lion went "garooo!", letting out a rousing roar. As though it was blown away by that lion's roar, my paralysis icon vanished.

The witch tried her paralyzing attack for the second time, but Tin went next after Lion and even Scarecrow stood up after that, dispelling her charms. Perhaps having exhausted her supply of spells, the witch swung her ladle about as she ferociously charged towards us.

The black-robed witch with a pointy hat on didn't look capable of weapon skills no matter how you looked at her, but the long ladle she brandished above her glowed red, slightly surprising me. As expected of a resident of this world, it seems she could command sword skills of the Poleax type.

"Kukeeeee——!"

She swung down the ladle with that shriek, but I easily took it on with my «Vertical Arc». I countered, driving her attack back, and Asuna turned towards the knocked back witch before switching in with a leap.

I do wonder if she really had to continue holding onto that tyke with her left arm even in this situation, but still, as expected of her, she succeeded in invoking a sword skill. Receiving five merciless stabs, one after another, the witch got blasted away even further. It was now Argo's turn, charging in without even giving her the time to land. With a dash that would exceed even Asuna's, she went under the witch and burst straight in with skills of the Wild Dance type, using the metal claws on her two hands.

As expected of a quest boss, the witch survived with barely any of her HP bar left over after suffering a skill combo from three high levels. She fell onto the floor with a thump, but stood straight up without getting stunned and ran back to the big pot deep within the hall. We were about to chase after her the

moment our skill delay ended, in anticipation of her casting another spell with that mysterious soup—but it happened before we even could.

The tyke, no, Toto suddenly jumped out of Asuna's arms and shot after the witch with the intensity of a bullet, biting onto her black high heels. Her leg snagged, the witch pitched forward and tumbled over with great force, plunging head first into the big, boiling pot with a splash.

Seconds later, a grand monster death effect sprouted up from the inside of that soup.

Having let out from the cage, the girl, Dorothy, expressed her gratitude to us repeatedly while embracing her pet dog, Toto. It seems that the girl will be continuing her travels with Scarecrow and the rest to search for «Emerald City» somewhere in this world.

After seeing off Dorothy and her party at that log house from earlier, I clapped the backs of a reluctant Asuna (probably due to parting with the dog) and a relieved Argo (this was due to the dog too) at the same time. The final «!» mark of the quest was floating within the log house. We should definitely be able to return to our original position if we enter the house and close the door.

"Now then, let's get back."

I watched the sky to the west while saying that line; the setting sun was just about to sink below the sea of clouds.

Part 7

The scarecrow, tin figure and lion sought for a brain, a heart and courage, respectively, even in the original "The Wizard of Oz"—that was what Asuna taught me on the way back through the skies.

However, they did not get them in the end. The Wizard of Oz said this at the end of the tale. That in saving Dorothy, who was kidnapped by the witch, Scarecrow used his wisdom, Tin expressed emotions, and Lion exhibited courage. Hence, all of you already have what you've wanted—

"...So that's it, huh. That's why both Argo and you knew that Lion and the rest would stand up even without clearing the sub-quests?"

I spoke with a bitter smile and just as the female team were about to nod in pride, the house landed with a scraping sound.

Upon exiting, I confirmed that this was the empty land in the forest where I found the log house long ago. Without waiting for Asuna and me as we stood still, Argo briskly cut through the lawn and spoke with a satisfied smile on.

"Thanks for today, both of you. In return, I'll keep that bit of information a secret and not sell 'T."

"Hah? That bit of information... what are you referring to?"

"You know, don't you!"

She gave me a quick wink—

"I wish both of you the best, Ki-bou, Aa-chan!"

Leaving us both frozen in shock, Argo disappeared from our sight with the stealth of a ninja.

Seconds later, Asuna started giggling, prompting me to follow along and loosen the tension in my face. As we laughed together, I felt that final thorn, that was embedded deep within my chest, vanish, leaving not a single trace behind.

—What I wished for, was already within my grasp the moment I stepped forth, wanting it.

I asked for Asuna to always be together with me and proposed. Hence, I have already found what I had lost then. The emotion of loving another.

"......Asuna."

Upon calling her name, Asuna stared at me with a smile still on her face.

I looked straight into those hazel eyes, glistening beautifully in the afterglow visible beyond the roof of the log house, and opened the Main Menu. Moving through two tabs, I softly pressed my finger against the button I was looking for.

I pressed down on the word, «Marriage», and touched the name, «Asuna», next.

Asuna's eyes shifted, noticing the small window appearing before her. Raising her right hand, her slender finger gently caressed the window—

"......Kirito-kun."

Asuna whispered that single word with her eyes unwaveringly on mine and pressed down on the «YES» button.

We found out the name of the autonomous control system that regulated this world, «Cardinal» a mere few days later.

As for the extraordinary «Automatic Quest Generation Function» that Cardinal was installed with, we were informed about that much, much later in the future.